

# Off Watch

“For my money, in long-distance voyaging, the rugged, aging, balding master mariner called Francis Joyon is sailing’s undeniable Greatest of All Time.”

## The G.O.A.T.

In recent years, in the world of sports, the acronym G.O.A.T. has become a popular tag to identify and laud the utmost in excellence: Greatest of All Time. In boxing, Muhammad Ali is definitely the G.O.A.T. In professional basketball, there are two passionate, divergent schools of thought regarding who deserves G.O.A.T. status: Michael Jordan or LeBron James. In pro football, at least here in New England, the undisputed G.O.A.T. is Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. Of course, in reality, there is no such thing as a true G.O.A.T.; it’s all conjecture, and arguing the merits of favorite athletes on the grandest stages is part of the fun of being a fan.

All that said, in recent times I’ve come to believe that in the world of offshore sailing an unlikely candidate has risen to supreme, exalted status: a stoic Frenchman who, at the not-so-tender age of 63, seems to get better, more ambitious and even more audacious with each passing year, while continuing to show his literal and figurative transom to all the Young Turks who are his juniors by decades.

For my money, in long-distance voyaging, the rugged, aging, balding master mariner called Francis Joyon is sailing’s undeniable G.O.A.T.

You are forgiven if you have no idea who Joyon is. He plays what has become a very French game that really has no equivalent in the U.S.—a high-risk contest that mixes high



**Now 63 and still ripping around the planet under sail, the stoic Frenchman has shown no signs of slowing down.**

adventure with high rewards. Let’s put it this way. I still get antsy sailing a boat on and off a mooring by myself. Joyon regularly races a 103-foot trimaran. Across oceans. Alone. Faster than anyone ever has.

Joyon made news in France last spring with the announcement of his latest record-hunting campaign aboard his maxi-tri, *IDEC Sport* (Group IDEC, a French conglomerate, is Joyon’s corporate sponsor). His 2019/2020 Asian Tour will commence in October with a solo run from France to Mauritius in the Indian Ocean (he needs to knock that off in less than 26 days); will move on to the South China Sea with a series of four fully crewed record attempts on

voyages from Singapore to Shanghai; and will conclude in early 2020 with a crewed run at the so-called Clipper Route from Hong Kong to London. And to think, I considered my last charter in the Caribbean a pretty cool trip.

One of the more amazing things about Joyon is that, though he’d spent his life sailing professionally after an unlikely childhood far from the sea, he didn’t become a household name in France until 2004, when he was almost 50 (by comparison, our football hero Brady is beating long odds, but still nearing the end of his career, by playing at 42). That year, he sailed a previous *IDEC*, a 79-footer, around the world alone in just

under 73 days, a world record at the time. But Joyon was truly just getting started.

In 2005, he broke the 11-year-old record for a solo crossing of the Atlantic in a shade over 6 days. In 2008, he again circled the globe singlehandedly in record-setting fashion, this time in under 58 days, aboard yet another new tri called *IDEC 2*. Five years later, on the same boat, he lowered his solo transatlantic record to 5 days, 1 hour. In 2017, sailing the maxi *IDEC Sport*, with a full crew he won the Jules Verne Trophy for fastest circumnavigation in just over 40 days. Forty! Days! Finally, in 2018, he won the transatlantic Route du Rhum from France to Guadeloupe by vanquishing the young superstar François Gabart—the seeming heir to the G.O.A.T.’s throne—in most dramatic fashion, by *seven minutes* after a voyage of 7 ½ days. The word in French for “incredible” is *incroyable*.

The *incroyable*, er, amazing thing about Joyon is he’s showing no signs of slowing down. His raw strength and endless stamina are legendary. He remains humble to a fault. In those rare moments when he’s ashore, he appears to be in no small rush to return to where he’s most comfortable. At sea.

There’s nobody else like Francis Joyon. Is he the greatest ever? I’m not positive. But show me someone better.

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“Don Street always believed that *Iolaire*’s massive boom, left over from her days as a gaff-rigger, ‘could be a real widow-maker’ in an inadvertent jibe.”

## The LAST CHAPTER

For legendary sailor and cruising-guide author Don Street, this past July 26 should’ve been a happy day: his 89th birthday. Instead, it will be a day Street remembers for all the wrong reasons—the day his beloved 46-footer, *Iolaire*, aboard which he roamed the Atlantic and the Caribbean with his family and friends over a half-century of ownership, was lost in heavy weather under the command of her latest owner off the coast of the Spanish island of Ibiza.

The boat’s rich history reads like a riveting maritime novel. What happened off Ibiza was just the sad, final chapter.

Street sold *Iolaire* in 2009. Before that, for five decades, the engineless red yawl was a ubiquitous presence in both Europe and the Eastern Caribbean, on both sides of the Atlantic, which she crossed seven times under Street’s command. It’s hard to imagine a sailor and his vessel being more intertwined than Street was with *Iolaire*. Street used the boat as his base to cruise, race, charter, explore and write, and his adventures spawned hundreds of magazine articles, the Imray-*Iolaire* charts of the Caribbean and Atlantic islands, three books, and his series of all-inclusive cruising guides.

Street has long maintained that, aboard *Iolaire*, through his own stories and travels, he demonstrated how accessible the Caribbean was, and that he played a huge role in

opening up the islands to the throngs of cruising sailors and charterers that followed. And he’s absolutely correct.

The 114-year-old *Iolaire* already had a long legacy when Street acquired the ship-wrecked boat, for \$100, off a beach in St. Thomas, USVI, in 1959 after she’d washed ashore when an anchor shackle failed. “I resurrected her from the dead,” he said.

Street has often said that if *Iolaire*’s gimballed dining table could talk, “oh, the tales it would tell.” Built in 1905,

the venerable Royal Ocean Racing Club and served as its commodores. Over the years, countless great sailors crewed aboard *Iolaire*, including high-latitude explorer Bill Tilman, America’s Cup legend C. Sherman Hoyt, and former submarine skipper Bill King, who became famous for his round-the-world voyage on *Galway Blazer*.

*Iolaire*’s second life, with Street as captain, was nothing less than extraordinary. She survived three hurricanes: a pair in 1961 and Hurricane



***Iolaire* in her glory in happier days, powered up with full sail and a full crew racing off Antigua in the early 1990s.**

she was immediately commissioned for racing, as she was every year (except from 1940 through 1945, during World War II), right up to 2019. Among her distinguished owners were Rose Richards and Bobby Somerset, both of whom were founders of

Klaus in 1984. There was a dismasting in the Anegada Passage in 1962, and the time she lost 10 feet off the top of the spar off Dominica in 1984. In that instance, Street sailed the boat home to Grenada with his 4-year-old daughter, Dory (who later sailed as a

navigator while a member of Dennis Conner’s America’s Cup squad), and a Grenadian boat boy. And Street counts another half-dozen near disasters, “three of which were avoided by the skillful work of crew and skipper, and three by her own lucky streak.”

Alas, *Iolaire*’s luck ran out this past July, reportedly when she jibed accidentally while sailing dead-downwind, and then hit the bricks on the rocky shores of Ibiza. The crew managed to scramble into a life raft and made it ashore safely.

Street always believed *Iolaire*’s massive main boom, left over from her days as a gaff-rigger, “could be a real widow-maker in an inadvertent jibe.” For that reason, he spent years rigging, testing and perfecting various preventer systems to head off such a possibility. “This was obviously not rigged on July 26,” he said.

Street, of course, was devastated by the loss, but has wonderful memories of “the long-lived and long-loved” *Iolaire*. “For 50 years, I lived on *Iolaire*,” Street said, with an emphasis on *lived*. “I camped out when I came ashore!”

And there is a silver lining to this dark cloud, an epilogue to the grand story. Perhaps the best thing of all about *Iolaire*: Her skipper Don Street—who loved her more than everybody else—is not only as feisty as ever, he’s still racing Dragons off the coast of Ireland, the oldest (and still most capable) in the fleet. Yes, *Iolaire* is gone. But Street sails on.

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“Once you’ve experienced the Northwest Passage, I’ve discovered, it’s like the Hotel California: You can check out, but you can never leave.”

## CONFRONTING *Terror*

Ten years passes quickly. It’s hard to believe a decade has slipped by since the cold spring in Seattle in 2009 when we were just weeks away from setting out for a west-to-east attempt at the Northwest Passage aboard the 64-foot steel cutter called *Ocean Watch*. I had never experienced such a conflicting set of emotions, in equal measures anticipation and anxiety. It all seemed so audacious. And kind of, you know, dangerous.

My nervousness stemmed from the fact that, as a lapsed history major, I’d become obsessed with the literature and annals of the storied Arctic waters, particularly the chronicles of disaster. Figuratively speaking, I was the rubbernecked sap on the freeway who can’t avert his gaze from the terrible car crash. Which meant I was particularly infatuated by the awful tale of the ill-fated Franklin Expedition, perhaps the world’s greatest mystery of the mid-1800s. Thanks to a terrific new exhibition called “Death in the Ice” at Connecticut’s Mystic Seaport Museum, all of it — Franklin’s journey, and my own — has recently come rushing back.

It’s been a chilly stroll down icy memory lane. Once you’ve experienced the Northwest Passage, I’ve discovered, it’s like the Hotel California: You can check out, but you can never leave.

The “Death in the Ice” traveling exhibit, created by the Canadian Museum of History, is just incredible. Following

### **In Pond Inlet, with the Northwest Passage behind us, all I felt was relief.**

the showing in Mystic, it will be on display this summer from June through September at the Anchorage Museum in Alaska. If you’ve always wanted to visit Alaska but needed a little extra incentive, head north. It’s that good.

The Franklin Expedition was named after its leader, Sir John Franklin, who in May of 1845 set sail from Britain with two ships and 129 men to find and chart a course through the then theoretical “Northwest Passage” to Asia. Somehow, the notion of sailing vessels called *Terror* and *Erebus* (the dark region of Hades in Greek mythology) seemed like a swell idea. In any event, after a final sighting of the boats by some whalers in Baffin Bay at the passage’s eastern entry point in late July, 1845, Franklin’s entire party simply vanished. Gone. Poof.

Two years later, the first of what would become over three dozen search expeditions spanning some

three decades was launched. Bit by bit, as fresh pieces of evidence were uncovered — a crewman’s letter left under a cairn, eyewitness accounts by Inuit hunters, abandoned campsites — the story emerged. Franklin’s death, the ships locked in ice, starving survivors, cannibalism; it wasn’t pretty. Then in 2014 and 2016, the sunken ships were discovered, and the mystery was fully solved once and for all.

Truth, as always, was stranger than fiction.

When we left Seattle in late May of 2009, headed north for the Arctic Circle and the legendary waters beyond, our fate was still unknown. The

**The landscape was flat, lunar. Polar bears came and went. The pastel twilight was so lovely it rendered us speechless.**

Northwest Passage was just the first stage of a planned trip “around the Americas,” from Seattle to Seattle, via Cape Horn, to promote awareness of ocean-health issues and climate change. The most daunting leg was the initial one. Would the ice permit us to pass? Or would we become beset in it, like Franklin? It was all yet to unfold.

Nearly every day aboard *Ocean Watch* brought new

adventures. By mid-July we’d made it through the surprisingly placid Bering Strait and reached Barrow, Alaska, at 70° N, having survived our initial harrowing encounter with the ice. The Northwest Passage loomed ahead, and soon enough, we were in it.

The landscape was flat, lunar. Polar bears came and went. On several occasions, we were literally stopped cold by the pack, our patience tested until new leads in the ice opened up. A successful transit was very much a tenuous matter. The pastel twilight was so beautiful it rendered us speechless. The local Inuit, after years of dealing with the consequences of warmer winters, were open and friendly but seemed wary of the future. The voyage itself took on its own all-encompassing life. There was nowhere else on the planet, only the present, the here and the now.

In late August, in a night I’ll never forget, we dodged the last icebergs and sailed down a dramatic corridor of snow-capped peaks lining Navy Board Inlet and into the small village of Pond Inlet at the tip of Baffin Island. Lo and behold, the Northwest Passage was behind us. It was, and remains, difficult to comprehend.

Unlike Franklin and his doomed mates, we’d made it. We were the lucky ones.